

Wellness Notes

Smell*

(Part II)

Causes and Prevention

Problems with smell happen for many reasons, some clearer than others. Loss of smell may be permanent or temporary, depending on the cause. As with vision and hearing, people gradually lose their ability to smell as they get older. Smell that declines with age is called presbyosmia and is not preventable. Age is only one of the many reasons that problems with smell can occur. Some people are born with a poor sense of smell, but this is not the case for most people. Most people who develop a problem with smell have recently had an illness or injury. The most common causes are the common cold and chronic nasal or sinus disease.

A couple other common causes of smell disorders are allergies and exposure to airborne toxic chemicals. Swollen sinuses and nasal passages often result in problems with smell. These conditions may cause total or partial loss of smell. The problem usually diminishes or goes away when the underlying medical condition clears up. You can help prevent problems with smell caused by respiratory infections and colds by washing your hands frequently, especially during the winter months. Hand washing helps protect you from getting respiratory infections and colds.

If your smell disorder is caused by allergies, you should avoid allergens, like ragweed, grasses, and pet dander. Also, get a flu shot every year to prevent influenza and other serious respiratory conditions that can result from the flu.

Loss of smell can be caused by nasal polyps, which are small, non-cancerous growths in the nose or sinuses that can block the ability of aromas to reach nerve cells high up in the nose. Removing the polyps may restore smell. In rare cases, benign non-malignant tumors grow on the nerves of smell, causing a loss of smell.

Tobacco smoking is the most concentrated form of pollution that most people are exposed to. It impairs the ability to identify odors. Quitting smoking is one thing you can do right now to prevent loss of smell and improve your sense of smell. Sometimes exposure to certain chemicals, such as insecticides and solvents, and some chemicals found in the workplace can decrease the sense of smell. Avoid contact with these substances, or if you do come in contact with them, see your doctor.

If you are taking certain medicines, you may notice a change in your ability to smell. Certain antibiotics, some blood pressure pills, some cholesterol-lowering drugs, and some antifungal medications can cause problems with smell. This occurs rarely, but it can happen.

Check with your doctor if you've been experiencing a problem with your sense of smell for a while. You may be able to prevent or get early treatment for a more serious health problem.